

VZCZCXRO0640

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RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHDF #0037/01 2681457
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 241457Z SEP 08
FM AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0165
RUCNFRG/FRG COLLECTIVE
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
INFO RUEHDF/AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF 0181

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSSELDORF 000037

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [PHUM](#) [GM](#)

SUBJECT: IMPRESSIVE SHOW OF SOLIDARITY WITH MUSLIMS IN COLOGNE; RALLY
BANNED

REF: DUESSELDORF 36

DUSSELDORF 00000037 001.2 OF 002

1. (SBU) Summary: The September 19-20 so-called "Anti-Islamization" Congress held by the local right-wing, anti-immigrant group "Pro Koeln" fizzled, after an impressive show of opposition by civil society groups and relatively few clashes. Local and regional politicians claimed "victory against intolerance," while Coordinating Council of Muslims (KRM) Spokesman Ali Kizilkaya told us of his appreciation for this largest show of solidarity with Muslims by German society ever. Fewer right-wing extremists from EU states showed up than predicted. The decision by the Cologne police to withdraw its permit for a "Pro Koeln" rally on September 20 led to commentary in the national media about a restriction on freedom of association, as the group has not been banned. "Pro Koeln" announced legal steps and pledged to hold a similar Congress at a later date. End Summary.

Broad Popular Rejection

2. (U) Following a lengthy campaign by trade unions, churches and other groups, as well as politicians across party lines, perhaps 15,000 people turned out to demonstrate solidarity with Muslims in one form or another during the two-day "Pro Koeln" event (reftel). The largely peaceful counter-demonstrations included several rallies, an open-air concert, as well as human chains featuring prominent politicians at the site of the future Cologne mosque and at a square where the group's concluding rally was planned. Many taxis refused to take passengers, while some hotels denied accommodation and pubs declined to serve "Pro Koeln" customers. A September 19 press conference had to be held on a boat on the Rhine, after organizers failed to receive permission to use several buildings. There followed a cat and mouse game in which demonstrators blocked landings, forcing the boat to pull ashore, far from its point of origin. After many reports that prominent right-wing extremists from several EU states would participate, in the end only Harald Vilimsky (FPO Secretary General), Filip Dewinter (Vlaams Belang floor leader), and Henry Nitzsche, independent Bundestag deputy from Saxony attended. Vilimsky called himself a "national liberal Cultural German," while Dewinter talked about an "Islamic invasion" and warned against a "civil war with immigrants." Nitzsche was introduced as the "only national-(thinking) Bundestag deputy."

3. (U) On September 20, some 10,000 demonstrators gathered in central Cologne, but only about 50 "Pro Koeln" followers managed to reach the site of the planned rally (under heavy police protection). Shortly before the event was to begin, the Cologne Police Chief revoked the permit, arguing that violence from leftist and anarchist groups made it "completely unreasonable" to use force by the police to ensure the event can go forward without "exposing bystanders and peaceful (counter)demonstrators to incalculable risks." About 500 violent

counter-demonstrators, who damaged S-Bahn lines leaving some 150 "Pro-Koeln" sympathizers at the airport, were taken into police custody and 15 arrest warrants were issued on charges of possession of illegal weapons and related charges. Six police officers were injured in the clashes.

Ban of Rally Spells Relief and...

14. (U) While condemning the violent incidents, Cologne Lord Mayor Fritz Schramma (CDU) and other politicians expressed relief that it had been possible to prevent the "Pro Koeln" event. Schramma called it a "victory against intolerance by democratic forces in our city" and North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) Minister-President Juergen Ruetters praised the "determination of the Cologne citizens to stand up for their (democratic and anti-racist) convictions." NRW Interior Minister Ingo Wolf (FDP) said the overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrations by a broad alliance against the Congress demonstrated that "racism and xenophobia have no place in our society."

.Criticism as a Restriction of Freedom of Association

15. (U) Some commentators criticized the decision by the Cologne police to withdraw its rally permit for "Pro Koeln," calling it an "overreaction that left a bad aftertaste." Renowned Bonn University law professor emeritus Josef Isensee called the ban a "disgrace" for a democratic state based on the rule of law and a "violation of the right to free speech and free assembly." Meanwhile, a "Pro Koeln" spokesman announced the group would sue against the rally ban before the Cologne Administrative Court and made clear its intention to hold its planned Anti-Islam Congress at a later date.

Mosque Critic Distances Himself from "Pro Koeln"

DUSSELDORF 00000037 002.2 OF 002

16. (U) The congress also prompted Ralph Giordano, a holocaust survivor, former communist, celebrated author, and an outspoken critic of the Cologne mosque project to distance himself clearly from "Pro Koeln" and the event. Aware that his criticism was being misused by "Pro Koeln" and its supporters, in a September 21 op-ed piece in Welt am Sonntag, he called participants "Euro-fascists" attempting to "exploit justified concerns within the population about Islam for their racist, rightist-populist ideology." At the same time he reiterated his criticism of the mosque project and his concerns about the compatibility of Islam and democracy.

Comment

17. (SBU) The popular opposition to the "Pro Koeln" Congress was the largest popular demonstration of solidarity with Muslims in Germany in memory, and quite possibly ever. KRM Spokesman Ali Kizilkaya and NRW Integration Minister Armin Laschet both told us they are convinced this is the case. The number of participants in both camps was significantly lower than predicted. Most of the violence originated among the far left counter-demonstrators, which prompted the (over)reaction by the police to deny the rally. "Pro Koeln" is not banned, although it remains under observation by the NRW Office of the Protection of the Constitution.

18. (U) This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
BOYSE